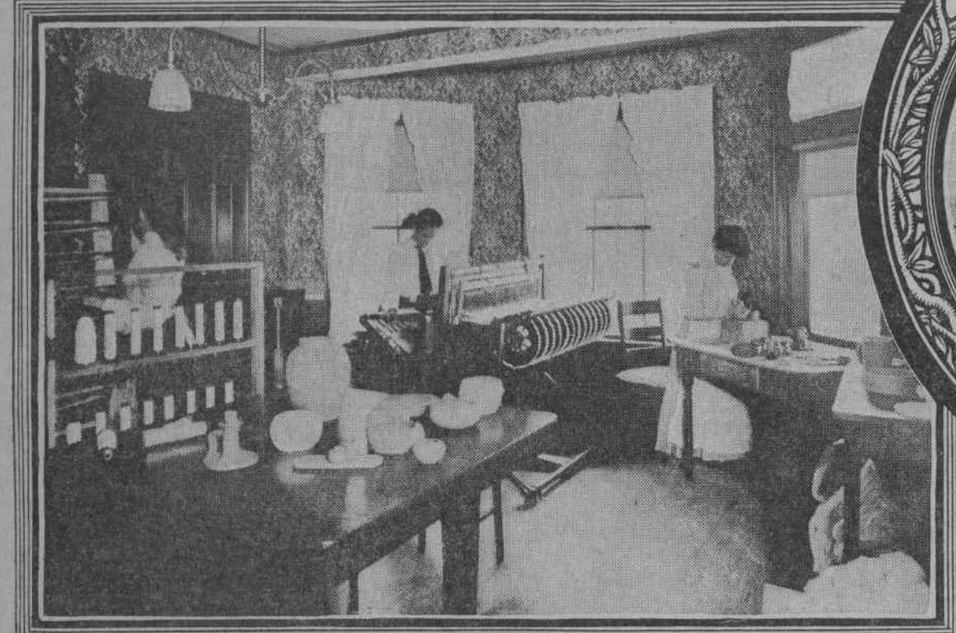
Our National Disease: Nervous Prostration

Discovered by an American and American life offers the most fertile field to develop its causes

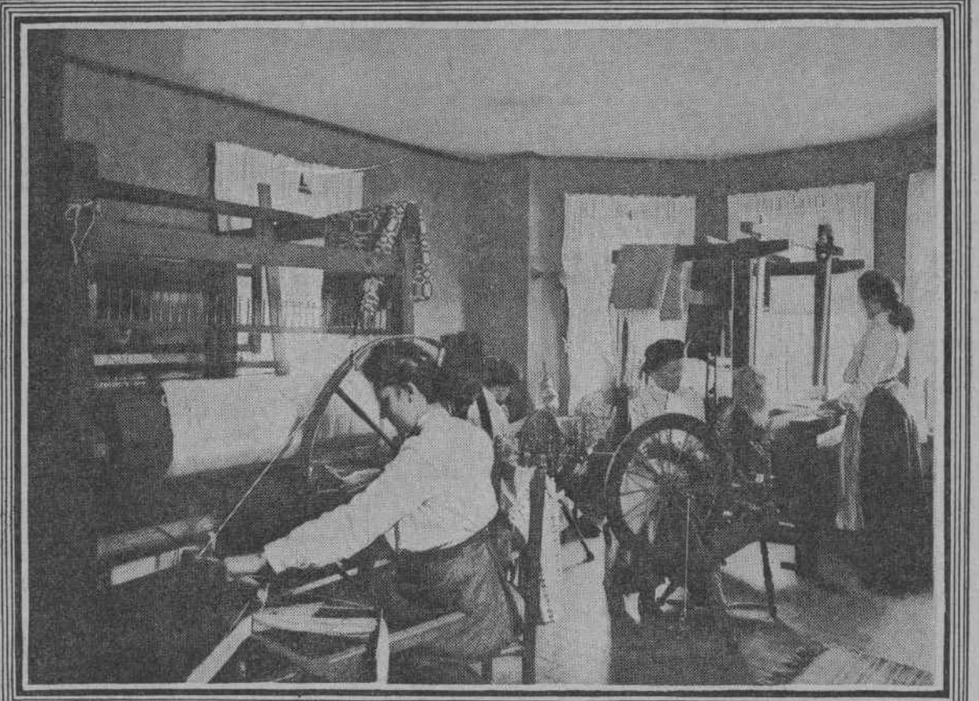
L.A.S.



Clay Modelling

Arts and Crafts House, Marblehead, Mass.

General Workroom



Rug Making

By Joseph Collins, M. D.

IT is more than thirty-five years since George M. Beard, a physician of this city, described the disease which is now universally known as neurasthenia, nervous exhaustion and nervous prostration. Neurasthenia, the name that Dr. Beard selected for the mental and bodily symptoms which he maintained constituted a disease, means literally nerve weakness. Dr. Beard found it easier to discover a new disease than to get the medical profession to recognize that he knew whereof he spoke and wrote. He devoted twenty years of youthful energy, tireless enthusiasm and matchless patience to the task and won out.

For years after he described neurasthenia the reality of its existence was ignored by all save a few specialists. The way in which the disease was accepted finally, however, was characteristic of the people of this country. We Americans do not move by steps, but by flights. When we turn over the first page we fly straightway to the end of the story. If we accept anything at all it must be wholly ours—even if it be a disease. Whether the disease described by Beard has taken a persistent hold upon the American people, or whether the American people have taken an insistent hold upon the symptoms, the fact remains that the popularization of neurasthenia has been complete. There is probably no other disease on record that has received such a degree of attention from the laity. Abroad it is often spoken of as our national disease. It is an American disease only in so far as it was discovered by an American physician and that America offers in an unrivalled degree the conditions upon which it thrives.

The Causes.

Work, worry and excesses are in a nutshell the immediate causes of neurasthenia. Work, worry and excesses form a trio which few constitutions are able to resist. Work alone is not an adequate cause, work and worry are. Our American life of to-day offers the most fertile soil in which these causes can flourish and multiply. The feverish competition in all departments of life, which is the outgrowth of the struggle in the industrial world, spreading like an epidemic even into the heart of social and domestic life, has infected all with a frenzy of unrest. This spirit of unrest is the spirit of our time. It finds expression in gigantic trusts, in strife between capital and labor, in our politics, our churches, our charities, our schools and our homes. Everywhere are excess and dissipation of energy. Our besetting sin is the tendency to sacrifice method to action—often to meaningless action. Our very refinements narrowly escape the vulgarity of being overdone. We overwork, overeat, overdress. We make a task of our amusements, and in order to sustain this unnatural tension we have recourse to stimulants in all forms, excitement being the chief. We score up to our account crimes of commission in order to escape faults of omission, and in the mad rush to win the game we sacrifice too often half of the advantage and nearly all of the pleasure of playing. Balzac said many years ago:—"This age is afflicted with a disease that makes every man strive to rise above his fellows, and there are more saints than shrines among us." The disease that Balzac speaks of appears to have emigrated since his day to America and to have become naturalized. It has broken the way for neurasthenia.

Neurasthenia is essentially a democratic disease. It is no respecter of sex, age or class. Men have it oftener than women, because they are more exposed to the exciting causes, but in proportion as women essay to rival men in their work and in their pleasures they expose themselves to neurasthenia. Formerly, when their restrictions were greater, though their usefulness was perhaps no less, neurasthenia was very uncommon in women. Neurasthenia existed long before Dr. Beard's time, but it has become more frequent as social, political and economic conditions have made the struggle for existence more violent and the prospects for a quiet life more perilous. So long as such conditions exist, and so long as mankind essays, through choice or necessity, to cope with them, just so long will neurasthenia continue to occur, unless in process of evolution the human species becomes more able to resist these factors. As there seems to be little chance that evolutionary progress will hurl itself into the breach it becomes necessary for the individual, in order that he may withstand the strife, to adopt measures that will tend to fortify his vital resistance and nervous equilibrium. It is a truism to say that all men enter the race of life differently equipped. Some may transgress Hygeia's laws every day without having a penalty exacted; others find it perilous to transgress once. Before any one gets far on the journey through life he finds himself possessed of certain funds that may easily be divided into two classes. The first is what we call inheritance. It is the amount of nerve force or energy with which each individual is born into the world and which he cannot help or hinder by a jot. The second is the amount of nerve force which he acquires. The first is his patrimony; the second what he makes of it.

Now, among the various endowments which each atom of humanity that enters the world has stored up within it in a kinetic state, to be developed and applied in the course of time, is this supply of neural force. It stands all through life, in the closest relation to all of his other faculties—so close in fact, that the exercise of every faculty that he possesses, each act that he commits, means a draft more or less heavy upon this neural reserve.

For the sake of illustration, therefore, this reserve may be referred to as his capital in the bank. This capital may be guarded or it may be squandered. In some instances repeated heavy drafts may be made upon it through a long life and still the owner is left with sufficient balance to suffice him in his declining years. Another man's inherited capital may easily meet the modest requirements of a well regulated existence of work and play but be inadequate to heavy expenditures. It can no more withstand the drafts that the other man's bank honors than the man with an income of ten thousand a year can live like his neighbor with a hundred thousand.

A third man possesses a small and unstable capital which needs to be carefully treasured in order to suffice for the demands of even the most favorably ordered life. Left to himself this one is in danger of becoming hopelessly involved before he reaches maturity or learns the lesson of conserving his forces.

Finally there remains the unfortunate who starts life a bankrupt. There is the neurasthenic who is born, not made. His fate has been determined by his progenitors. The bank of health honors no drafts drawn by him until he has made a deposit and it scans his balance day by day to see if it is satisfactory.

All that the individual can do in any case is to acquaint himself with his own possibilities and weaknesses, make the best of the first and respect the latter. This lesson is usually learned late in life—that is, after the break has come, after the symptoms of neurasthenia have developed and the physician has been called in to restore order out of the chaos that ensues.

But what are these symptoms that must be recognized before they can be treated? Neurasthenia is described in technical terms as "a neurosis or affection of the nerves without organic basis," which means that it is a disorder of the nervous organization without any detectable change in the nerve itself. No wonder the doctor of bygone days called it imagination. He could put a patient through the most searching examination and yet "see" nothing wrong.

The symptoms are twofold—bodily and mental. The mental are often the most important.

The distempered mind
Has lost that concord of harmonious powers
Which forms the soul of happiness; and all
Is off the poise within.

Symptoms Shown.

The general mental tone is one of degression. Rarely it takes the form of true melancholy, oftener of dread, indefinable fear, introspectiveness and painful foreboding. Then there is a keen sense of incapacity, coupled with the conviction of pressing need for action, intense and unremitting restlessness, hypersensitiveness to certain impressions and insensibility to others, inability to concentrate the mind—either to focus it at will or to banish truant thoughts; through it all the harrowing sense of losing one's grip upon one's self, coupled with an impotent determination and effort to get it back. The unfortunate invalid loses all desire for mental and physical work and becomes thoroughly convinced that he is doomed. The physical symptoms are headache, insomnia, backaches, indigestion, loss of weight and general evidences of lack of nutrition. These of themselves are usually easily coped with, and the correction of them is of prime importance, in fact of absolute necessity, but they are not the most important.

Neurasthenia, more than any other disease, requires for its treatment the finest individualization. And for this reason all the science and skill known to mankind is of little avail unless it be reinforced by the intuition that enables the physician to put himself en rapport with the patient and divine the subtle workings of the disease upon the morbidly sensitive mind of the latter and to apply this knowledge in such a way as to establish his own influence and win the patient's confidence. He needs a great deal of "that vast elemental sympathy which only the human soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless fields" that Walt Whitman tells about. Counsel is often more serviceable than physic. An illustrious hypochondriac once formulated some excellent advice that applies to the matter in hand. "Do not, however, hope wholly to reason away your troubles; do not feed them with attention, and they will die imperceptibly away. Fix your thought upon your business, fill your intervals with company and sunshine will again break in upon your mind." (Boswell had written to Johnson complaining of melancholy.)

The reason why the well known "rest treatment" is so effective is that it brings with it routine and discipline. The sufferer is removed from the scenes of his sufferings and all that tends to remind him of the causes that brought them about. There is an entire change of scene and surrounding. Then there is enforced rest and proper feeding, by aid of which the stronghold of the enemy is attacked from the outset. Being under the constant watchfulness of a nurse, directed by the physician, the medical plan of treatment can be the better understood and carried out, also the use of such physical measures as massage, water treatment and gentle exercise, all of which, tending to regulate and accelerate the natural constructive processes of the body, in turn react upon the mind to calm and pave the way for sleep, nature's sweet restorer. To these are added the reassuring presence of a capable nurse, the absence of too sympathetic—though well meaning—friends who constantly remind the patient of his sufferings; and, lastly, the influence of the physician who must "understand." Often the complete isolation of the rest treatment is unnecessary. Nourishment, rest and exercise properly alternating, and perhaps a change of scene and the routine of one's ordinary life, will suffice. But the burden of deciding how complete the "rest cure" shall be rests with the physician, for it is he who must interpret and inspire and measure out for each case.

If Americans do not wish to establish a national disease they must pause in their strenuousness and hark back to the old Greek ideal of a sane mind in a sound body. We need to cultivate equilibrium by securing a balance between work and play, exercise and rest, hand and brain, expression and inhibition, to add to our daily prayer the petition, "From the sin of overdoing, good Lord, deliver us," to look well to our neutral capital and to keep a reserve. If the account threatens to become overdrawn curtail expenditures. This curtailment may have to be begun very early in life by parents and teachers. It may mean curtailed ambitions, and fortunate for mankind if it does. We would do well to remember that we are a part of nature and living under her laws, which are more inexorable than man's. They admit of no appeal or exception.

Poorhouses Robbed of Their Stigma

EVERY country has its charitable institutions for the care of the aged. Of the homes where comfort may be assured in old age none offer more attractions than those of Denmark, though Russia and Austria have well managed institutions of this kind.

One secret of the success which has been reached by the Danish homes for the aged is the result of the care with which the inmates are sorted out so that the worthy are never herded with the worthless. No respectable old man or woman need ever become a pauper; no respectable old man or woman ever crosses the threshold of a workhouse. Should a man—or a woman—who has completed his sixtieth year find himself without the wherewithal on which to live, he applies to the local authorities not for pauper relief, but for old-age relief; and this, by the law of 1891, they are bound to grant him, providing he can prove not only that his destitution is owing to no fault of his own, but that he has led a decent life, has worked hard and been thrifty, and that during the ten previous years he has not received a single penny as poor relief been guilty of vagrancy or of begging.

The old people who fulfil these conditions are placed in a class apart from ordinary paupers—in the privileged class. They are the veterans of industry, and the position they hold among their fellows is much the same as that held by invalided soldiers. Although they are housed, fed and clothed at the expense of the nation, they are neither regarded nor treated in any way as paupers.

In Denmark the word "pauper" is never applied to any one above sixty, unless it be a case of Tekel. Infinite trouble is taken, indeed, to keep the members of the privileged class free from everything that smacks of pauperism. Local authorities are forbidden by law to house them under the same roof as paupers or to allow pauper officials to interfere with them. The old men retain their votes and all their rights as citizens, too, and this, in itself, raises an insuperable bar between them and paupers, for paupers in Denmark have no civic rights worth mentioning—not even the right to get married. Members of the privileged class who have relatives able and willing to take care of them or who are strong enough to take care of themselves are each provided with a small annuity, and the rest are lodged in old age homes.

There is no stigma attached to the fact that one or one's relative is an inmate in a home for the aged in Denmark. None are admitted except those who have led decent, sober lives, and this gives the inmates an acknowledged standing which is a great source of gratification to the honest poor.

The consideration with which these old persons are treated is in direct contrast to the rules which are enforced in some homes in other countries. In London, for instance, there is a "model" workhouse where several hundred old men and women are forced to get up at six in the morning, the same time as the young and strong. This is simply to save the officials the trouble of having two breakfasts.

In the home in Copenhagen short work would be made of any master or matron who ventured even to suggest such an arrangement. There the officials are never allowed to forget that it is their business in life to make their charges comfortable and happy; that they are in the home, in fact, for no other purpose than to cook for them, tend them, nurse them when they are ill and give them a helping hand generally.

They must keep watch over them, of course, and keep them from harm, but they have orders to interfere with them as little as possible. Denmark holds to the sensible idea that these old people are worthy, and there is no reason why they should be placed under strict rules. They go to bed when they like, get up when they like and visit their friends when the fancy seizes them. They lead their own lives so long as they behave properly and conform to a few simple general rules, but should they abuse this liberty the master or matron must, of course, intervene. If this does not avail the local authority may be called in to enforce the rules.

The model old age home for all Denmark—and this means for all the world—was built and organized under the direction of Herr Jacobi, the chief of the Poor Department. He has done more than any man in Europe to make the world understand that all the schemes for benefiting the poor will come to nothing unless they are based on classification. He declares that it is impossible to make decent old folks comfortable if they are housed with folks that are not decent.

The new home is a fine, large building situated in the midst of a beautiful garden. The rooms are large and cheerful, well warmed in winter and well ventilated. The rooms are prettily furnished, and the inmates are allowed to bring with them when they enter any belongings to which they are especially attached.

These things give to the place a pleasant touch of homeliness which contributes not a little to the comfort of those who live there. The old men are on one side of the building, the old women on the other, while the married couples have special quarters of their own.

The food in all the Danish homes is excellent, but in the Copenhagen home it is better even than elsewhere, as the cooking of it is watched over by an expert, the former chef of a great restaurant, who takes immense pride in the dainty dishes he serves up for the city's old pensioners. Were he to see the hunches of hard beef that in English workhouses are placed before toothless old men and women he would be horrified at the extravagance as well as at the inhumanity.

The lucky old folk for whom he caters have everyday dinners that they can eat in comfort, teeth or no teeth—dinners made up of stews and broths and cunningly devised concoctions of such things as sheep's heads and tripe—all at once cheaper and more nutritious than beef. The dishes are always highly seasoned, just as the class for whom they are provided like them, and they are served quite hot. In English workhouses the food is at best lukewarm.

These dinners cost less than the midday meal of the workhouses, which is proof of the miracle which can be wrought by good cooking and management. The inmates take the greatest pleasure in the private stores which are dealt out to them twice a week—bread, white and brown; butter, cheese, and every day a half bottle of beer. They are as well clothed as well fed, and as well supplied with amusement. A military band plays to them in the garden and there is a theatre to which they are admitted free. If our deserving aged could at the age of sixty change their nationality and become Danes what a peaceful, cheery old age might be theirs!

Japan has the monopoly of camphor production, for it is only in that country and Formosa that the camphor tree flourishes commercially.

The Marblehead Harbor Sanitarium

UPON a rocky promontory jutting into Marblehead Harbor stands a building dedicated a few months since to an enterprise which has leaped from a novel experiment to a pronounced success.

This institution is a combined sanitarium and handicraft shop, and it represents the working out of an idea of one of the prominent physicians of Marblehead concerning the treatment of patients in the various stages of nervous prostration. This physician, who has made and is making a special study of nervous diseases, became convinced that between extreme neurasthenia and the normal condition of health there was a stage that required that mind and body should be actively and intelligently employed at least for a portion of each day. It was at first proposed to fit up a suite of rooms, something after the fashion of an arts and crafts shop, where weaving, clay modelling, raffia and leather work, together with wood carving, should be taught and where patients should be under medical care.

The practical part of the undertaking was made possible by Miss Luther, who was for two years in charge of the Labor Museum at Hull House, Chicago. Her services secured, the work was started in cramped quarters last spring. In June, however, an ideal building was found in the former house of the Bay View Yacht Club, which had been remodelled and leased as a summer dwelling. The property was acquired by the promoters of the plan and immediately taken possession of. Very few interior changes were made and the exterior, with its spacious, sunny verandas, commanding a wide view of the sea, left nothing to be desired.

It was at first thought that the building might be made to serve as a home for the patients and a museum as well, but with the constantly increasing number of day pupils who enjoyed good health and who were admitted to the classes with the idea of benefiting patients through healthful associations, the home scheme was found impracticable. Excellent accommodations were found outside for those desiring them.

The workroom of the modellers during the morning hours presents a fascinating aspect. Dainty vases, candlesticks, ink stands and innumerable articles of unique design spring as by magic out of the pliant clay beneath the deft fingers of the manipulators. The firing is done by the instructor, a kiln for the purpose being in the basement.

An excellent rose bowl ornamented with cuttlefish and another with an octopus trailing his long fingers over the pale green surface are on exhibition. A lamp bowl has dragons on it, and a bonbon dish is fancifully decorated with spider crabs. The designs are taken from the seaweed and the dwellers in the deep, and are original with the moulders. The clay used is of the common red variety, obtained at a Beverly pottery.

At a table by themselves, gayly chatting as they work, is a group of wood carvers, busy with chisel and block. One girl holds up a Jack Tar, as the result of her first efforts, while another bends over a more elaborate article, too much interested to glance at the visitors.

Upon the loom in the weaving room is a counterpane of herring bone strips in indigo and white. Three strips are required for the finished cover and a long knotted fringe is added at the ends.

There is a rug of cream white besprinkled with conventionalized fish of a soft sea-green, table scarfs and covers of odd patterns. At one loom stands a woman who is making a dress from the warp to the finish. In a low chair in front of the fire sits a girl busily spinning, for all the world like our grandmothers of old. The looms possess an interest of themselves. They are with two exceptions of ancient Colonial manufacture, having been rescued from the oblivion of farm house attics to resume their duties again after long years of idleness and rest.

The entrance of the physician and the leaving of some of the workers for the upper story draws attention to the fact that the patients are not allowed to work beyond a certain point of fatigue. Rest rooms are provided up stairs, where couches and easy chairs invite weak muscles and tired brains to repose.

Several trained assistants are employed who work with the patients furnishing a constant example of how things should be done. The result is that in a surprisingly short time the novice acquires sound principles and begins to turn out a creditable product.

The sitting room has four large windows looking directly over the harbor, and in severe storms the ocean spray is dashed far up onto the cliffs. The floor is of polished oak and the wainscoting of sage green cartridge paper; the mission table strewn with magazines, the willow chairs and couches all tend to lend an air of artistic beauty and charm to the place.

There may be seen some of the finished work in curiously difficult woven and shaped baskets. In an adjoining room patients are busily engaged weaving their baskets, laughing and chatting in soft, low tones the while, in such an interested, animated way that one wonders if any of them can really be nervous sufferers come for a cure. The hours of work vary with individuals. Each Tuesday afternoon the house is open to visitors and tea is served to all who wish it.

Although the enterprise is yet in its infancy and doubtless many changes and improvements will suggest themselves with its growth, its immediate success will seem to prove that it has met a need not alone as a refuge for nervous sufferers, but also as a training school in useful and ornamental arts for young women.